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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DOHA 000054

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SUBJECT: AMIRI DIWAN OFFICIAL DEFENDS QATAR'S ACTIONS ON GAZA

REF: A. DOHA 42
B. DOHA 24

Classified By: Ambassador Joseph E. LeBaron, for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

(C) KEY POINTS

-- A public relations adviser to the Amir, Hassan Al-Ansari, explained that Qatar's actions on Gaza stemmed from this small state's need to "do something" to stave off "lots of internal and external pressure" and "stay one step ahead of the region."

-- Qatar gained nothing, he said, from hosting the Israeli Trade Office; its closure will not change Qatar's desire to maintain contacts with Israeli officials or accept the travel of Israelis to Qatar.

-- Al-Ansari underscored a handful of times that former Secretary Rice's exclusion of Minister of State Al-Mahmoud from a January 8 meeting "insulted and disrespected" Qatar's senior leadership, as if to link the perceived snub to Qatar's unhelpful behavior later in the month.

-- He observed that while the Obama Administration is not to blame for Qatar's "history of mistreatment" under the previous Administration, the new Administration nonetheless inherits an aggrieved partner in the relationship.

-- Despite Qatar's misgivings, it supported the U.S. in Iraq and helped persuade Hamas to participate in Palestinian elections that Hamas was bound to win. Qatar will stand with the U.S. on Iran if there is trust on the end game.

(C) COMMENTS

-- Al-Ansari's remarks further confirm our sense that the Amir places great value on actions he regards as honorable and feels much aggrieved -- and angry -- at the way he and Qatar have been treated in recent years.

-- Little thought, however, appears to have been given in advance of Qatar's actions as to how the new Obama Administration would perceive Qatar's behavior of the last couple of weeks, and Al-Ansari's remarks underscore that Qatar's leadership does not perceive the damage done to the relationship.

End Key Points and Comments.

¶1. (C) P/E Chief Rice expressed disappointment January 21 to Hassan Al-Ansari, a public relations adviser to the Amir, over the January 17 meeting in Doha, especially the inclusion of Iran and terrorist organizations. P/E Chief added that against this backdrop, the GOQ decision to close the Israeli

Trade Office dealt a huge blow to perceptions that Qatar, as a mediator, maintained relations with everyone. The timing was especially unfortunate given that the new Obama Administration appears inclined to engagement, traditionally a strength of Qatari diplomacy.

¶ 12. (C) Al-Ansari, who had requested the meeting with P/E Chief at his Qatar Tribune office (Al-Ansari is editor-in-chief of the English-language daily) before the above events transpired, explained Qatar's actions on Gaza by saying, "Qatar is a small country and we have to stay one step ahead of the region; we can't afford to do otherwise. Something had to be done about Gaza." Turning to the closure of the Trade Office, he observed that "the Israeli channel did not give us anything. We opened it when there was a peace process. There is not one now."

¶ 13. (C) Al-Ansari said the GOQ could still communicate with Israel, and Israelis could continue to visit Qatar, in the absence of a trade office. The holding of the January 17 Arab meeting and the closure of the Israeli office were a response, he said, "to lots of internal and external pressure." Al-Ansari added that there is a strong perception that Qatar and the U.S., which enjoy wide cooperation in the energy, education and military fields, are too close. He suggested that Qatar needed to put distance between it and the United States over Israeli actions in Gaza.

ACCUMULATED ANGER, FRUSTRATION, AND HURT FEELINGS

¶ 14. (C) Al-Ansari underscored to P/E Chief (in an assertion

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that he would repeat a handful more times during the meeting) that Secretary Rice's decision to exclude Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Al-Mahmoud from a January 8 meeting with Arab Foreign Ministers "really, really hurt." The former Secretary "treated us and him like we are terrorists and an Iranian agent. It was insulting and disrespectful." Al-Ansari then recited a list of occasions during the Presidency of George W. Bush when the Amir was snubbed by the President. Al-Ansari hinted strongly that the snub of Al-Mahmoud was the final straw for the Amir.

¶ 15. (C) P/E Chief said he appreciated Qatar's anger over events in Gaza, stressing that none of us want to see human suffering. That said, why does Qatar choose to align itself more with extremists at the start of the Obama Administration? Noting that such actions did not hurt the previous Bush Administration, P/E Chief asked Al-Ansari to explain Qatar's reasoning. Al-Ansari said Qatar's response stemmed from anger and frustration.

¶ 16. (C) Pressed for how Qatar believed the Obama Administration would react when these decisions were made, Al-Ansari declined to respond directly. Instead, he likened Qatar's relationship with the U.S. to a marriage. He observed that couples "do not agree all the time, but that does not mean that you stop the relationship." Sometimes, though, one partner needs to "apologize to the other over hurt feelings." Al-Ansari acknowledged that President Obama played no role in the various snubs of the Amir, but offered that the new President inherits the marriage and "dishonorable" behavior of the past.

¶ 17. (C) Al-Ansari reminded P/E Chief that Qatar stood by the U.S. in the invasion of Iraq despite Qatar's grave reservations. Qatar's Amir also pushed Hamas to participate in elections in the Palestinian Territories, even though Qatar and other Arab states held the view that Hamas would win the elections.

¶ 18. (C) Turning to Iran, Al-Ansari said "now is the time to strike a deal with Iran while oil prices are low." He added that, "Qatar will stand with the U.S. on Iran if you want to

take military action, but we don't trust you to share your end game with us." He said Qatar and the Gulf states need to know if the U.S. is serious about a diplomatic deal.

TO RIGHT THE RELATIONSHIP, INVITE THE AMIR

19. (C) Asked for his advice on how to improve the political relationship going forward, Al-Ansari paused and said, "The best thing the U.S. can do to fix the relationship is show respect for Qatar and the Amir. An invitation for the Amir to visit the White House would probably fix everything."

LeBaron